Drug combination can halt advanced skin cancer

A combination of two immunotherapy drugs can wipe out the most deadly form of skin cancer even when the disease is advanced, trial results indicate.

Of 95 patients given the treatment, more than 60 per cent were still alive after two years and of these a fifth had no detectable tumours remaining.

A total of 142 melanoma patients were randomly allocated either to receive two drugs, nivolumab and ipilimumab, or ipilimumab alone.

The therapies, consisting of lab-made antibodies, are designed to overcome the ability of some cancers to evade the immune system.

Findings from a US-led trial testing the effectiveness of the drug combination were presented at the annual meeting of the American Association for Cancer Research in New Orleans.

James Larkin, consultant medical oncologist at the Royal Marsden Hospital, London, has treated patients with the drugs as part of another trial.

Dr Larkin said: "These latest data show us that combining these two immunotherapies is an effective two-pronged attack against the cancer. The overall survival rates observed using the regimen of nivolumab plus ipilimumab are very promising."

In 2013 about 14,500 people in the UK were diagnosed with melanoma and 2,100 died from the disease.

The immune system is constantly fighting a battle with cancer, and usually wins. But sometimes it fails due to cancers exploiting mechanisms designed to prevent a too-strong immune response harming the body's own tissues. Antibody drugs, known as "checkpoint inhibitors", interrupt two different signalling pathways to take the brakes off the immune system.

Patients taking part in the trial had two common forms of melanoma, one with a "normal" version of the BRAF gene and the other with a mutated version.

A total of 69 per cent of patients from the normal BRAF group treated with the combination therapy were still alive after two years. For all the combination therapy patients, two-year survival was achieved by 64 per cent.